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Response Paper 4, *White Noise*

Or

How a Cat Video on YouTube Helped Me Understand Richard Taylor’s “Happiness”

The stemming sense of inadequacy that is at the heart of the world of advertising is pervasive in Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*, apparent in individual interactions, as well as organized expressions of the human condition. Inadequacy is rampant. Advertisements are designed to create dissatisfaction with one’s life, which, conveniently, can easily be made better by using their product. The Gladney family relies on material goods to remedy their perceived inferiority, and even find safety in them.[[1]](#footnote-1) Jack is told he is harmless without his glasses and robes; furthermore, he serves as the head of the department of Hitler studies, but does not know the German language. Babette is an inadequate subject for the drug Dylar, according to product manager, though he seems convinced that someday someone will be. Superseding this, though, the people of *White Noise* face an inadequacy as humans, who are expected by nature to be better and deeper than animals, yet cannot always rise above the instincts that appear to be intrinsically instilled in them.

The lowered expectation of humans for animals is expressed in “I’m a Stupid Cat!”, a viral YouTube video with over ten million views to date. In the video, Polk muses about animal that does not know it is going to die, immerses itself in trivial pleasures and has no responsibilities to fulfill. While in this context, Polk makes fun of this cat for this, and we view the cat comically because these are its unambitious and uncritical desires, according to Murray, this is what humans wish to regress to. This is what he believes car crashes express: we don’t expect more from animals, but as advanced as humans are, technologically and metacognitively, we at times wish we weren’t. As much potential as the human race has in America, the car crashes depicted in pop culture express a basic desire for “lightheartedness” and “carefree enjoyment” (219). Americans, then, are gleefully and innocently self-destructive: the love of the car crash expresses the desire to remove themselves from life and the expectations associated with higher living. Life as a totality becomes a naïve nostalgia for the visceral, and men will juxtapose discussions of childish games (spitting into soda bottles) and considerations of their own mortality (particularly Grappa’s mental map of what his own funeral will be like) because they both involve an earnestness and a lack of expectation that would otherwise be waiting to not be met. It is only once the higher expectation is placed on us that we are afraid we cannot (or do not want to) meet it.

Much of the energy of the Gladney family is fixated on the need to focus on the simulation. Not unlike the SIMUVAC drills, if real tragedy occurs during it, it is not as significant because they have to maintain the simulation. There is an overwhelming urgency to maintain the illusion that everything is under control, and that any problem is easily fixable.[[2]](#footnote-2) In this way, simulation does not function for reality. Reality functions for simulation. Mercator does not connect his climbing into a cage filled with snakes as real. We make the connection in assuming that for animals, life and death are simulation. The thought of death does not occur to them (much like how it did not occur to Mercator at first.) It is the “at first,” though, that distinguishes us from the animals, and it is the capability of an “at first” as opposed to an “always” – of being able to even “accommodate the thought of death” -- that gives us a moral obligation for profundity, and it is the townspeople’s inability to get past the materialistic in order to reach this profundity that fuels the inferiority of the smartest animals on Earth (195).

Discussion Question

In what ways do you think characters’ own senses of inferiority affect how they interact with other people? If people are just the sum of their nerves and their data, does the way someone perceives you affect your actions at all?

Works Cited

Polk, Jr., Mike. “I’m a Stupid Cat!” Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 1 Aug. 2011. Web. 11 Nov. 2013. <youtube.com/watch?v=qpl5Moaxni4>

1. Jack finds solace in his glasses and robes, and amplifies his role in the academic world with a pen name that lends a greater air of sophistication. The television and radio also become integral parts of the lives of the Gladney family, and continually interject in the conversations between the family, their words about feelers on butterflies having just as much weight as the words of their loved ones (DeLillo 96). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This holds especially true for employing material remedies to personal problems. A little white pill aims to erase the fear of death. Even when Jack begins to speak to Babette about her problem with Dylar and her infidelity, he continues to offer her material things – Jell-o with banana slices, liqueur – as the quickest fix to the moment of emotional vulnerability they are trapped in during the conversation. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)